



A Reader's Guide to the Work of  
**Harriet Lerner, Ph.D.**

## *The Dance of Deception*

### **An Introduction to the Reader's Guide**

One cannot read *The Dance of Anger*, *The Dance of Intimacy*, or *The Dance of Deception* without being challenged or changed in some fundamental way.

"Once after a lecture," Lerner says, "a seventy-three-year-old woman came up and introduced me to her ninety-five-year-old mother. They were holding hands. The daughter told me that they hadn't spoken to each other for over two decades until they read *The Dance of Anger*."

Lerner hears "you changed my life" stories from readers on just about a daily basis. A nationally acclaimed expert on the psychology of women, Lerner has a remarkable ability to translate complex theory into accessible prose. A prolific scholarly as well as popular writer, her books have been published in more than thirty foreign languages with book sales of more than 3 million. She also writes a monthly advice column for *New Woman* magazine.

This Reader's Guide to the Dance trilogy of Harriet Lerner is designed to be a useful tool for either individual readers or study groups. It includes biographical information, a conversation with the author, recommendations on forming a book (or Dance) group, and brief study guides for each of the three books of the trilogy.

### **An Introduction to Harriet Lerner**

#### A Brief Biography

Harriet Lerner was born in Brooklyn, New York, on November 20, 1944. She is the second of two daughters of Rose and Archie Goldhor. Her parents were first-generation Americans, both born to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents. They were high school graduates who held jobs they did for paychecks but avocations that brought them great joy.

Archie worked for the New York State Employment Agency for more than thirty years, but his real love was his shop in the basement of their house. "He could build anything," says Lerner. "He made all of our furniture, along with toys, lamps, and jigsaw puzzles. He loved rosewood, classical music, the *New York Times*, and peace and quiet. He had a peace-at-any-price philosophy, which I did not abide by."

Lerner's mother, Rose, worked in an office, but her passion was art. When she was in her late fifties, she started working for artists she admired: in exchange, she asked for artwork, thus creating an art gallery in her home. "My mother, now eighty-seven, has given me a magnificent collection of paintings and sculpture and, more important, and enduring love of art and beauty."

Lerner's sister, Susan, five years her senior, is a biologist and researcher in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The two sisters have collaborated in writing children's books; their first is called *What's So Terrible About Swallowing an Appleseed* (HarperCollins, 1996.)

Growing up, Harriet and Susan often spent weekends at the Brooklyn Public Library, and the Brooklyn Museum. "These places were free and just a subway token away. Learning and culture were big values in my family."

Lerner says that her mother had an unwavering belief in her daughters and strong principles about how to raise children. "Even during the hardest economic times she made sure that Susan and I had four things that she believed were essential to our later success: good shoes (I don't mean stylish); a firm, quality mattress; a top pediatrician (none other than Doctor Benjamin Spock); and a therapist." Her mother's belief in therapy (which cost only one dollar per session under the family's health insurance plan) undoubtedly contributed to Lerner's career choice.

Lerner attended local public schools and then went off with her best friend, Maria, to the University of Wisconsin at Madison, where she majored in psychology and Indian studies. She spent her junior year studying and doing research in Delhi, India.

Lerner received an M.A. in educational psychology from Teachers' College of Columbia University and a Ph.D. in clinical psychology from the City University of New York. It was there that she met and later married Steve Lerner, also a clinical psychologist.

"It's been great to be in the same field because we love exchanging ideas and sharing our work," says Lerner. The couple did a predoctoral internship at Mt. Zion Hospital in San Francisco and moved to Topeka, Kansas, in 1972 for a two-year postdoctoral training program at the Menninger Foundation.

"We always planned to move back to the Coast. But two years in Topeka turned into two decades," says Lerner. She identifies herself as a Kansan and claims to have overcome her coastal arrogance. She has grown to love the simple life (meaning she has never had to learn to parallel park) and the big open skies. Lerner and her husband have two sons, Matt and Ben.

Lerner travels nationally to lecture, consult, and present workshops. She is a senior staff psychologist and psychotherapist at the Menninger Clinic. She continues to write and always has a "book in progress." Her newest is *The Dance of Connection*, which HarperCollins will publish in 2001. She claims to be an undefeated champion at the game of jacks. Any challengers?

## A Conversation with Dr. Harriet Lerner

*The content of your books seems to flow easily and speak personally to each reader. I'd like to begin by asking you when you first started to write.*

During most of my growing-up years in Brooklyn I kept one of those lock-and-key diaries. This helped me to see writing as an ordinary daily activity, to not be afraid of seeing my words on paper, and to understand the act of writing as comforting. And my diaries were my place to tell the truth, although I didn't always do that.

*Was there a glimpse of future talent in those diaries?*

Absolutely none.. No evidence of literary talent, insight, imagination, or even courage. Today, when I'm invited to talk to students in the public schools, I bring a diary along and pass it around. If I'm going into a sixth-grade class, I bring my sixth-grade diary.

The students are enthralled. They thumb through the pages and say to one another, "Wow, if she can write a book, I can do it too!" They realize that writers don't have fairy dust sprinkled on them. We're just plain folks.

*Isn't that very brave—passing your diaries around?*

When you reach fifty, your life is no longer embarrassing, because you realize that everyone's life is embarrassing.

*So many women want to write and don't dare or think they can't. Do you really believe that anyone can write?*

I don't think there is a writing gene, or a publishing gene, although some people have a larger share of natural talent and luck. But I believe that writing, like conversation, is a basic form of human communication rather than the property of a gifted few.

We should not allow someone to discourage us from writing any more than we should allow someone to discourage us from talking. If another person tells you that you can't write—well, disbelieve them.

***Writing is so difficult that I sometimes wonder what motivates writers to write?***

Many, many things move us to write. We can write as a spiritual practice, like climbing a sacred mountain, as Deena Metzger puts it. Or writing can be the tactic of a "secret bully," as novelist Joan Didion reminds us—"a way to say listen to me, see it my way, change your mind." Many of us write with modest goals, like to change the world.

But if what's driving us to write are the "wrong things," our writing won't be good or it won't come at all. I've learned after long years of experience that every time I have writer's block my unconscious is trying to tell me I'm off track.

***I know that you've been critical of so many experts jumping on the advice-giving bandwagon. So how did you get into writing self-help books?***

With enormous reservation, actually. I think women can't be cautious enough in facing the advice-giving industry, which is a multibillion-dollar business sensitively, attuned to our insecurities, our purses, and our endless and impossible pursuit of perfection

But the truth is, I've come to love and value writing self-help books. And I think I've managed to avoid recipes for success, quick-fix solutions, and blueprints for relational bliss.

***So you didn't start out seeing yourself as a "popular writer?"***

Definitely not. First I published in scholarly journals and scientific publications. It was a sudden and unexpected turn in my career when I wrote *The Dance of Anger* in "just plain English" and for "just plain folks."

It was an incredibly difficult transition, but I was dedicated to the task. Anyone who thinks that it's simpler to write simply has never done it, or has never done it well. Of course, I had many worries at the time.

***Like?***

Like I worried that my colleagues would write me off. And I wondered whether a book could really change people's lives.

***And what did you conclude?***

Some self-help books do change people's lives. I know, because many, many people have told me so and I believe them. I've been incredibly moved by the response to my work.

***And surprised?***

Yes, very much so. As a psychotherapist I know that substantive change often occurs slowly, sometimes at glacial speed. So it has amazed me to see how people could take an idea from my Dance books and just run with it.

***I'm wondering if you think your Dance trilogy should be read in any particular order.***

I'm frequently asked that question, and people can be very insistent in wanting an answer. Sometimes I tell people to eyeball all three and just see which one they're most drawn to. Sometimes I tell people the opposite, to start with the book they are absolutely certain couldn't possibly have any relevance to their own lives. ("Who, me? Angry!?" ) Really, my books can be read in any order and they will build on one another.

***When you were working on The Dance of Anger, did you know that The Dance of Intimacy and The Dance of Deception would follow?***

No way. *The Dance of Anger* was a five-year project with endless revisions—and this was in the days before I had a computer. I could wallpaper the largest room in my house with rejection slips from my first book. When it finally was published, I was convinced no one would read it besides my mother and my seven best friends. And I said, "I will never do this again. Never. It's too hard."

***But you kept writing more books?***

The extraordinary response from readers amazed and inspired me. But I learned that the line between being a *New York Times* bestselling author and being a writer who never gets published at all—well, it's a thin line indeed.

***And do you have any thoughts about what makes the difference between success and failure?***

Perseverance, talent, and yes, luck.

***I know that a lot of people wonder why you write for women, when you're an expert in families and relationships. Why do you?***

There is a long and short answer to that question. The short answer is that I write for women because I want to, it's where my heart is. Men read my books as well, usually because their therapists tell them to. And of course, they find themselves in them. On most days I believe humans are more alike than different.

***I know that you identify yourself as a feminist. How has the feminist movement influenced your writing?***

How hasn't it? My debt to feminism is simply incalculable. Feminism allowed me to see past a "reality" that I had once taken as a given. It helped me to pay attention to countless voices, my own included, that I had been taught "don't count." Feminism allows me to maintain hope.

***But don't other people think that feminism is a biased and narrow perspective?***

Well, it's not so. We may think it's a narrow perspective because no author writes, "This book is informed by my patriarchal perspective." So when people hear the term "feminist perspective" or "lesbian perspective" or "Latina perspective," we think that the voice is narrow and biased because the dominant group just has a "perspective." Like their reality is "it."

***What do you most want to accomplish in your books?***

I want to help people navigate their relationships in clear and solid ways. Learning a bunch of "techniques" won't cut it. I want my readers to understand how relationships operate and why they go badly. And this includes seeing the part that we ourselves play in the problems that bring us pain. And I want readers to see the broader picture of injustice and inequality that affect us all. There is never a resting-place in the struggle for a fair world.

***Is there some particular virtue, quality, or trait that you think is especially important for women to develop in our lives?***

Courage. I once heard Maya Angelou say that courage was the most important of all virtues. Because without courage, we can't practice any of the virtues—patience, honesty, forgiveness—with consistency. I agree with her.

***Speaking honestly, do you see yourself as a courageous woman?***

Not in terms of facing physical challenges, like, say, climbing a mountain or rushing into a burning building to attempt a rescue. I'm not heroic. But I'm brave in terms of speaking out and saying what I think, even if my heart is pounding and I'm terrified. Without this kind of courage, I might as well not write.

## **The Dance of Deception**

### **Pretending and Truth-Telling in Women's Lives**

When *The Dance of Deception* was published, Lerner discovered that women were not eager to identify with the subject. "Well, I don't do deception" was a common response.

We all "do deception," often with the intention to protect ourselves and the relationships we depend on. *The Dance of Deception* unravels the ways (and whys) that women show the false and hide the real—even to our own selves. We see how our relationships are affected by lying and faking, by silence and pretending, and by brave—but misguided—efforts to tell the truth.

Truth-telling is at the heart of what is most central in women's lives. It is at the foundation of authenticity and creativity, intimacy and joy. Yet in the name of "honesty," we can bludgeon each other. We can approach a difficult

issue with such a poor sense of timing and tact, that we actually shut down the lines of communication rather than widening the path of truth-telling.

Sometimes Lerner's advice takes a surprising turn—for example, when she asks us to engage in a bold act of pretending in order to discover something "more real"; or when she tells us not to parachute down on our family to bring up a "hot issue" without laying the necessary groundwork first.

Whether the subject is affairs, family secrets, sexual faking, or the challenge of "being oneself," Lerner helps us to discover, speak, and live our own truths.

## Quotes for Discussion

"From the moment we are first wrapped in a pink or blue blanket, we learn stories we can tell and whether there is an ear to hear them." (Page 82)

"If we are not told the truth, we cannot trust the universe—including our internal universe of thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. (Page 82)

"Children are the least empowered family members; as such, they can afford to take few risks, whether real or imagined, with adults on whom their very survival depends." (Page 97)

"Most of us can count on our bodies, like the dreams of our unconscious, to at least *try* to keep us honest." (Page 175)

## Questions for Discussion

1. Women are socialized to pretend, to settle, and to call our compromises "life." Our bodies are harder to fool. Discuss how the body may signal us when we are not living authentically or speaking truly. (Chapter 12)
2. How do we distinguish between "privacy" and "secrecy"? When do claims to privacy hurt rather than protect the integrity of our relationships and our selves? (Chapter 4)
3. All families have "hot issues" and secrets. Discuss the role of secrets and silence in your family. (Chapter 10)

Use the case examples throughout the book to plan the best way to open up a difficult subject with a family member

## Tips for Forming a Book (or Dance) Group

All around the country, women have gathered together in book groups to discuss the authors and ideas that interest them. In discussing the Dance trilogy of Harriet Lerner, however, women often find themselves engaged in a process that is more personal than intellectual, more intimate than academic. Such a different process may call for some changes in the organization, expectations, and structure of a book group-. Here are some ideas to consider.

Some readers prefer the traditional, salon-style arrangement, where ideas are shared but participation does not require self-disclosure or personal involvement. In such an arrangement, attendance is flexible, the size of the group can vary from five to twenty participants, and confidentiality is generally not an issue.

Others prefer a book group that fosters self-examination and self-disclosure, in which members apply Lerner's ideas to self and relationships—a Dance group. For this style,

- An optimal size group is seven to ten members but can start with four and build up over time.
- Weekly or bimonthly meetings are helpful to maintain momentum.
- Confidentiality is an issue and should be clarified up front to help generate trust.
- Consensus about expectations and structure is essential. For example: "We'll meet from eight to ten every Wednesday night. Members who will be late or absent should call. We won't have a leader but the person whose home we are in will get the discussion rolling."
- Focus is helpful. Determine the topic or scope of the discussion in advance. (For example: a particular chapter or the study questions provided in this Reader's Guide.)

Dance groups typically choose a book to start with (say, *The Dance of Intimacy*) and discuss one chapter per meeting. In salon-style reading groups, an entire book will be discussed in an evening.

Dance groups are free and anyone can start one.